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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001703

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

ALSO FOR IO A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK

P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY

USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER

NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/27/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI EXPECTS NO SOLID WINNER IN ELECTIONS

REF: BEIRUT 1690

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri dispelled rumors that the postponement of the November 26 parliamentary session was for political reasons, explaining that the session lacked a quorum from both the opposition and March 14. He expressed pride that his Amal Movement won a number of seats in the student council elections at the American University of Beirut and Saint Joseph University. Berri predicted a narrow margin of victory for whichever coalition won the 2009 parliamentary elections, believing that compromises needed to be made when forming the electoral lists, a process that he said he would launch "at the last minute." It would be "criminal" to delay the parliamentary elections, he thinks. He was not optimistic that the next session of the National Dialogue would make significant progress. Berri relayed that the UAE foreign minister warned him November 27 Lebanon could not expect much funding from the Emirates due to the financial crisis. End summary.

PARLIAMENT DELAYED DUE TO  
QUORUM, NOT POLITICAL, ISSUES

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¶2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and his advisor, Ali Hamdan, on November 28 at Ain el-Tineh. Dispelling the rumor that the postponement of the November 26 parliament session occurred because March 14 deputies were intentionally absent to protest a proposed wage increase, Berri said that indeed parliament lacked the necessary quorum, but this was because deputies from all blocs were unable to attend the afternoon session. He further said that both the opposition and March 14 had supported the wage increase, but that PM Fouad Siniora had opposed the move for budgetary reasons.

AMAL DOING WELL IN  
UNIVERSITY ELECTIONS

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¶3. (C) Berri relayed that his Amal Movement party is performing well in university student council elections (reftel), saying that 21 of the 24 Amal candidates won during

the November 26 election at the American University of Beirut. He noted with pride that one Amal candidate was elected in the Saint Joseph University elections, explaining that while Amal always wins at Lebanon's "Arab" universities, it typically has been less successful at American/Christian universities such as AUB or Saint Joseph. The Beirut Bar Association was another election victory, he claimed, with one Amal candidate elected as an alternate member. Berri discounted these elections as predictors for the results of the 2009 parliamentary elections, but did say that their outcomes affect voters psychologically.

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS  
TO CLOSE GAP BETWEEN  
MAJORITY AND OPPOSITION

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¶4. (C) Anticipating the parliamentary elections will lead to a narrow margin of victory for one side (without saying which), Berri said it would be necessary to make compromises when forming electoral lists, and in the elections' aftermath. If March 8 and its allies are victorious, he explained, they would lack a strong Sunni figure on their side, and would require such a Sunni voice in order to best represent the people. (Note: The example of Education Minister and MP Bahiya Hariri, a Sunni from Sidon, illustrates Berri's point. Over the years, Bahiya Hariri -- Saad's aunt -- has alternated between running on Berri's list and running independently. It is not clear yet which list she will run on in 2009. End note.)

BEIRUT 00001703 002 OF 003

WILL FORM LISTS AT  
"LAST POSSIBLE MINUTE"

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¶5. (C) Berri remarked that he preferred to decide the electoral lists in the final three days before the elections, but that with the new electoral law, the lists must be determined 60 days prior to the elections. (Note: Previously, the candidates' nominations were submitted 60 days out, but the lists were formed at the last minute. End note.) He said that he bases his decisions on the composition of his opponents' lists. His Amal party is most focused on the West Bekaa, particularly Zahle, and Baabda, Berri stated.

INTRAOOPPOSITION COMPETITION  
FOR DEPUTY SEATS?

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¶6. (C) Berri anticipated that the election would be very competitive for Amal in Sidon, but stated his confidence that in Jezzine, he will "not permit anyone to interfere," including Michel Aoun and Hizballah. Current Amal MP Samir Azar, who is a Maronite from Jezzine, was very strong among the Christians in his district, Berri submitted, and would not face competition from Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun. Berri's ally. However, Berri added, Azar needed Berri to secure the Shia votes. (Comment: Berri's statement suggests intra-opposition competition exists when forming electoral lists. End comment.)

¶7. (C) Berri stated his preference for an electoral law based on proportional representation, with all of Lebanon as one single district, and including Lebanese expatriate votes. He explained the diaspora votes are important because "Lebanese are the most intelligent people -- doctors, lawyers, successful businessmen -- but when they enter Lebanon, all Lebanese become jackasses."

PRESIDENT SHOULD  
NOT FORM OWN BLOC

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¶ 8. (C) Berri voiced his support for the concept of a president's parliamentary bloc, but one that is formed on its own, rather than at President Sleiman's behest. He relayed that he had urged Sleiman personally to remain unininvolved, like a neutral "judge." Berri added that the President currently enjoys the support of the Amal and Hizballah deputies, but if he actively forms his own bloc, he will lose this support.

"CRIMINAL" TO  
DELAY ELECTIONS

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¶ 9. (C) "It would be a crime to delay the elections," was Berri's retort to media reports hinting at a delay. He wondered if some political figures linked progress on the Special Tribunal, commencing shortly before the parliamentary elections, to a potential obstruction of the elections.

LOW EXPECTATIONS FOR  
NEXT NATIONAL DIALOGUE

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¶ 10. (C) In addition to expressing his own lack of optimism for results from the third National Dialogue session of the year, scheduled for December 22, Berri claimed that majority leader Saad Hariri did not expect the national defense strategy would be formulated before the parliamentary elections. Berri noted that Amal had its own national defense strategy, but preferred to wait until it had seen the other proposals before revealing its plan. Commenting on Aoun's plan, Berri said he had expected that "it would have been worse."

GULF HIT BY FINANCIAL CRISIS;  
LESS AID EXPECTED FOR LEBANON

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BEIRUT 00001703 003 OF 003

¶ 11. (C) Berri, who had met with visiting UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayid al Nahyan the previous day, reported that the Gulf region is suffering from the international financial crisis. According to Berri, the UAE FM bluntly said that Lebanon can no longer count on money from the UAE as it could before the crisis. Finding the silver lining to the global financial situation, Berri said much of the Arab dollars have already started flowing into Lebanese banks, which the Arabs perceive to be more stable in the crisis.

SISON